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AN ABORIGINAL SCHOOL - A MODEL 1979- ?



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(Mr Moeckel, Principal of Umbakumba School, plans to implement the following approaches at his school in 1979. Readers will be interested in his conceptualization of the education program for these tribal children and adolescents.)

This model is based on the following set of suppositions:

- the Aboriginal school should be bilingual;
- Aboriginal people are traditionally tied to their land and therefore students are reluctant to leave their local community for further education;
- Communities in Australia will become self-managing, self-sufficient, and will determine their own future;
- education of Aboriginal children will prepare them for their rightful position in their Community in relation to the above;
- the Aboriginal attitude to education is different from that of the European Australian, and schools should cater for their needs as seen in the Community and not through the eyes of middle-class non-Aborigines;
- Aboriginal people have the right to education on the basis of the United Nations Charter, Article 26:

PARENTS HAVE A PRIOR RIGHT TO CHOOSE
THE TYPE OF EDUCATION THAT SHALL BE
GIVEN TO THEIR CHILDREN.

DEVELOPMENTAL UNIT : 4-7 YRS
BICULTURAL INFORMAL SOCIALIZATION

JUNIOR UNIT : 8-10 YRS
FORMAL BILINGUAL - ORAL ENGLISH

TRANSITION UNIT : 10-11 YRS

SENIOR UNIT : 11-12-13 YRS
FORMAL ENGLISH
MAINTAIN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE

MATURE UNIT A

MANUAL LOCAL
INDUSTRIAL

Pre-trade
Certificate

MATURE UNIT B

ACADEMIC LOCAL
CLERICAL FINANCIAL

Pre-trade
Certificate

RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE
LEADING TO FURTHER EDUCATION
NON-LOCAL

SCHOOL INTAKE

From experience gathered, there seems to be a case for raising the school intake age in Aboriginal schools. This applies especially to the intake into formal learning situations.

Traditionally, Aboriginal children's education is an on-going process which commences at birth and continues throughout their lives. However, this process is not one in which the child is compartmentalized into learning situations, as in the conventional school. In the formative years the Aboriginal child learns through imitation and experience, by being close to the events which affect its life. Women are the main educators and in this role they allow the child to experience life and its effects. During this period of informal learning, the children are under little stress and discipline, and their supervision only protects them from harmful learning experiences.

In general, the education process is free, unstructured and open.

The child is, then, under no pressure to learn at any rate predetermined by a structured learning situation, is under no strict discipline and little compulsion, and is free to behave within the norms of the cultural activities.

The women, who have the role of educators, enjoy their children and their company, and have the patience of timelessness; rates of learning and peer-group pressure have little influence on the progress of the child in the learning situation.

It is not until the child nears the time of initiation that there is any real pressure for him to conform to any strict rules or discipline. It is at this time that the male members of the community take over the role of educators of the boys especially.

The conventional school does not cater for this process of education - almost immediately the child enters the school he is confronted with a structured and disciplined learning situation. He is placed in a box which is foreign to his experience, where he must conform to the norms of a foreign attitude and pressure to learn at a predetermined rate. This rate of learning pressure intimidates him and his parents, and in consequence he reacts against the pressures by rejecting the formal learning situation.

Parents have not as yet accepted the norm of non-Aboriginal Australian education, and find themselves under no compulsion to send children to school on a regular basis. This irregularity in school attendance affects the child for the remainder of his school career. There begins the failure of the Aboriginal student which follows him throughout his school career.

UNITS VERSUS CLASSES

In the beginning, all children enter Year One. Some children learn quickly and others slowly, but at the end of the year they are promoted to Year Two. The fast learners cope with the next grade well, but the slower pupils begin to fall behind. Once they begin to fail they do not progress, but continue to fail at each grade level until they become the remedial learners of Year Seven. Then their failure is complete and they drop out as failures in education. In the conventional school, children progress through classes which maintain a built-in failure factor.

In the Unit system, the children learn in an open learning situation, where they progress at an individual rate and where they are surrounded by available materials at their own progress level. There is no 'promotion' in this structure, only a progression on a sequential learning scale. In this way the child can progress both up the scale and laterally. That is to say then, that the child can progress on to a new unit, or move laterally on to a revision unit, to reinforce or extend any concepts from the original unit.

In the model, all the units are at broad basic levels, and movement from one unit to the next is not a promotion but a natural progression, as the child learns new concepts. Although the teacher still has the prerogative to move the child from one unit to the next, the movement is flexible, and it is hoped that each unit will cater for an overlap at each extremity, so that transition from one unit to the next is smooth, without any break in sequence.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MODEL

DEVELOPMENTAL UNIT: Ages 4 to 7 years

In this Unit, children will attend school in an informal learning situation. It is hoped that the Unit will attract children and their mothers into an open, creative, extended play situation, where children will be under little discipline, but encouraged to learn in a free, unstructured, experiential learning situation. Major emphasis will be placed on the acquisition of basic socialisation skills and oral English.

As the child progresses through the Unit, gradual emphasis will be placed on regularity of attendance, and increase in concentration and awareness of group behaviour. The program should be bi-cultural, in so far as the mothers and other female members of the community will teach the children in the behavioural modes of the community, and the non-Aboriginal teachers will encourage the children in the arts of play in the school. The school policies will gradually be reinforced, and social awareness of the school situation will be taught in the free and open environment.

Children will acquire the skills and attitudes of learning rather than be taught these skills in a formal situation.

JUNIOR UNIT : Ages 8 to 10 years

After the socialization program, it is hoped that the children will have acquired the skills of formal learning. It is also hoped that the school will be a place for enjoyment, and the learning situation will be formal, but still free and open.

This Unit will provide bilingual education, the children learning the skills of reading in the Aboriginal language. A major emphasis will be placed on the acquisition of oral English skills. In the Unit, the major task of teaching will fall on the shoulders of Aboriginal teachers, and the non-Aboriginal teachers will be the guide to programming and teaching method. The non-Aboriginal teachers will also be responsible for the teaching of the oral English program and other concepts which are not well based in the Aboriginal culture.

TRANSITIONAL UNIT : Ages 10 to 11 years

It is hoped that, by the time the children reach this Unit, they will be literate in the Aboriginal language. It is then the responsibility of the teacher in that Unit to apply the skills acquired in the previous Unit in the Aboriginal language, to English. Although the change-over Unit will be intensive in English, a second socialization program will have to function. This time the socialization program will involve socialization into a bi-cultural situation. The children will learn the basic skills in communication in the English speaking sector of their community.

SENIOR UNIT : Ages 11, 12, 13 years

This Unit will be conducted in English. The students will follow the current Northern Territory curriculum, and begin their education towards complete literacy and numeracy in the English

language. It is hoped, however, that the Aboriginal language will be maintained throughout the Senior Unit.

From this Unit the student will have three choices as to the further education he will follow -

- a) Attendance at a transitional college (residential) where he will be prepared for secondary education and hence further education in the wider Australian system.
- b) MATURE UNIT A. In this Unit there will be a further development of literacy and numeracy but a greater emphasis will be placed on the industrial arts as appropriate to the local situation. That is, there will be an attempt made to introduce local industry skills, for example, fishing, farming, mechanics, building etc. It is hoped that the skills imparted in this Unit will fulfil the student's needs to take his position in the community as a working member.
- c) MATURE UNIT B. In this Unit, the work and the teaching will be more academically oriented, placing emphasis on the skills required in the non-industrial local vocations, for example, book-keeping, clerical skills, financial skills, reporting and recording skills, and some managerial skills.

As both these latter Units are to be oriented towards the needs of the community, it is hoped that when the student leaves the school, he will have the pre-vocational skills to accept employment in the community. It is also hoped that during the last year in these Units, the students will be able to attend work/vocational experience sessions with the skilled employees of the community. It would be relevant to the student to acquire the skills in the vocation he intends to enter. In consultation with the works organizer, a formal certificate of Pre-vocational skills could be presented to the student after completion of the Unit.

CONCLUSION

In many ways this approach is not new nor radical. However, this model attempts to make the education of Aboriginal children more meaningful in the local community. The school will become more a part of the community and will prepare its students for life within the community.

The entire structure of the model will be community based, and unless the student elects to leave the community, he will be prepared for the community.

Most important, perhaps, is that the school will serve the community in its quest for self-management, self-determination and self-sufficiency at a local level, and depart to some extent from the more irrelevant Australian middle-class education now inflicted on Aboriginal people who have no real desire to enter the wider Australian society.

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(Statement from Australian Pre-school Association Incorporated, ACT., continued from page 18).

She states that "...the children's intellectual and social development are not jeopardised due to lack of understanding of the English language. The children are encouraged to retain their first language and English is taught as a second language by the trained staff.

This issue, edited by Dr Fred Ebbeck of Adelaide, includes reports from all States covering a wide cultural diversity, from Timorese children in Darwin to Aboriginal children in isolated and urban areas. All the writers agree that the mutual acceptance and preservation of cultural differences, values, traditions and expectations by everyone in Australia are necessary for the benefit of this country's children.

For further details - see the *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Volume 3, No.4,

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